

The American Veteran, Edition 6, Part 1

Hello, I'm Jim Benson.

This is "The American Veteran," a public affairs program produced by the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

This is our sixth episode and we'll take you around the country to show what VA is doing to provide the benefits and services you have earned.

Our first stop: Minneapolis, Minnesota, site of the 25th Annual National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

Over 500 competitors did their best in 17 events. Jean Van Trump shows us the challenge of swimming without the use of her legs. While Brent Garlic will let us know he owns the basketball court.

But first, petite, friendly Holly Koester from Ohio inspires all of us to never quit.

Koester: (video: athletes in wheelchairs racing on outdoor track) I started doing road racing small distances around the track and now am going out and doing marathons.

Benson: Holly is competing in the 1500 meter race which is about a mile.

Koester: These games mean everything to me. I mean they showed me what I could do and they have given me more confidence and they make me want to do better and let me see other people and the accomplishment that they have done.

Benson: Holly was injured in a car accident while driving to her base right before the first Gulf War.

Koester: How people participate in these games here are how they participate in life. We've all got obstacles, we all have different disabilities and I see the people that have worse disabilities than I do and I admire them and their courage and their determination. After you finish your event you turn around and cheer the next one on, because you never leave a buddy behind.

Benson: After Holly wins the race, she takes an extra lap to encourage others to reach the finish line.

Koester: The last lap, it's the end you're tired but if somebody is with you, you always push harder so you just go with them and tell them the finish line is at the end and they have to push strong. They did that for me so if I can do that for my fellow teammates I want to do that. (To fellow racers) Keep going alright! Yes!

Benson: Holly won a gold medal in every event in which she competed.

Brent Garlic, Wheelchair Athlete and Basketball Player: (video: basketball played by athletes in wheelchairs) I do basketball. That's basically all the skills that you can possibly put together, a mixture of speed, a lot of strength and endurance. I'm not the tallest, but I'm not the smallest so I get around and I can play with the big men. Usually the smaller you are the faster you are, so I think I'm fast enough to be the fastest.

Benson: Brent was paralyzed from the waist down in a military training accident in California five years ago. This is Brent's first time at the wheelchair games.

Tom Brown, Wheelchair Games Director: When somebody becomes disabled a lot of times they think that feeling of being a member of a team is gone forever. Through wheelchair sports, through the Veterans Wheelchair Games I think we bring that spirit and that ability and that knowledge back to them.

Basketball Player: On those fast breaks make sure that you make the blue team turn out not in.

Garlic: The chemistry is kind of off. People are still not really sure what their roles are. You know, it's a group effort. I feel like I was putting in a lot more work, but I felt like I was more talented than most of the people. Most real athletes we train all year for this. Basically, I trained all my life for something that I didn't even know was ahead.

If you've got a skill in a certain thing or many things you gotta come show them, some how, some way. Even if you're not competing you've gotta come because you've got to see it. If I had known these things were going on while I was rehabilitating, I would have come out a long time ago. Nothing keeps me away from a challenge.

Jean Van Trump, Wheelchair Athlete and Swimmer: The games bring out the best in us. You just have so much of a heart-felt love for all of these other people because we were all comrades, we all served in the military at one time or another.

I was injured by shrapnel wounds. We were out on patrol and there was a child that was strapped with grenades and I was hit with shrapnel when the child exploded.

I don't call it a disability, I call it an inconvenience. This doesn't focus on your disability, it focuses on what your abilities are.

Benson: Jean was sent to Vietnam 3 times before her injuries became too debilitating. This is her third year at the wheelchair games.

Van Trump: You get excited, you're waiting for it to happen and you've practiced and you've done all these things and it comes down to the wire and you're just ready to go.

We're pulling against our own body weight because of the fact that we can't use our legs. They don't work. So we're actually swimming harder than most swimmers do and it takes a little bit longer, but it's so gratifying and so satisfying. And it's not a matter of whether you win or lose, it's a matter of, you're all doing it together and everybody's cheering you.

I feel a sense of longing to accomplish things that I didn't know I could do. We're all not just competing against each other, but competing against ourselves to do better each and every time we come here.

Benson: Next year's event will be in Anchorage, Alaska, July 2nd through the 7th. If you or someone you know would like to participate, contact a recreation therapist at your local VA medical center for details.

Our next stop, Lyons, New Jersey, where the New Jersey Health Care System is taking an unconventional approach to helping homeless veterans gain valuable work experience. Nina Edwards has more.

Edwards: Each day at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Lyons, New Jersey, you'll find Gordon McChesney sprucing up the driving range on campus.

McChesney: I like this. This is better than having a corner office.

Edwards: Before he came here, Gordon spent three years in the Marine Corps. But after he was honorably discharged, he found himself divorced twice, living in a boarding house and an alcoholic.

McChesney: The last three years were hard. These three months, it was a sigh of relief just to know I was coming in here.

Edwards: The New Jersey VA offers a domiciliary rehab program known as the "dom" for homeless vets like Gordon. But here, the work programs are a bit unconventional.

John Kuhn, Chief, Homeless Services: We didn't start out saying we're going to start businesses. We started out saying, what do we need to do here? What is it that the veterans need to put their lives right and what are they telling us and what do we see? That's where we started.

Edwards: So with a little ingenuity, and a partnership with a local non-profit, a golf driving range was created, providing meaningful work opportunities for transitional vets.

Gerald Gaynor, veteran: (Video: Gaynor handling fresh-baked cake) This loosens the cake up so that it doesn't stick when I turn it over to take it out of the pan.

Edwards: Soon, the program will add the "Foxhole Café," the place Gerald Gaynor is learning all he can about running a small restaurant.

Gaynor: It's time for me to look seriously at my life, I've got to change.

Edwards: After spending ten years in the Air Force, he too found himself homeless and addicted to alcohol and crack cocaine.

Gaynor: I couldn't do one without the other. So, before I knew it, my life just started going further and further down.

Edwards: But after six months in the program, Gerald now believes he has just the right ingredients to create a better future.

Gaynor: The mind is a terrible thing to waste and I've been wasting it a long time, so it's really time for me to use it.

Ralph Owens, veteran: (Video: Owens handling a piece of wood in a workshop) We'll let it dry and within the hour we'll start staining this.

Edwards: US Army Major Ralph Owens is familiar with the fight. Three years ago, he too became homeless and turned to the New Jersey VA for help with alcoholism.

Owens: I call this the "bubble." It's a safe haven. We're away from the street, the old influences. We're clean, we're protected, if you will.

Edwards: While in rehab, Ralph revamped the veterans construction team.

Owens: The program prior to me getting here was struggling.

Edwards: Ever since, Ralph's been sober and now heads up his own construction company which, in turn, hires other vets in transition.

Sylvester Kines is sharpening his work skills in the greenhouse. This Navy veteran was diagnosed with mental illness while in the service. Soon after, he turned to cocaine for comfort and became homeless.

Kines: I was more than homeless, I was hopeless. Usually I was winding up in 21-day programs, which wasn't long enough. I needed something that was a program where I could stay clean for a while.

Edwards: Sylvester found that program here, a place where he believes hope is growing.

Kines: It means to me that I have a new way of life, a new way of living without the use of any substances.

Edwards: Sylvester's been clean for 118 days now and counting. And while he says each day, sometimes each hour, is a struggle, he now has a purpose in life.

Kines: I can't say what my future is going to hold. I'm just living for today. And I'm just thankful that you know this is a good day.

Benson: If you would like to talk with a social worker or VA counselor please contact your nearest vet center by going to www.va.gov on the Internet or by calling 800-827-1000.

For the Department of Veterans Affairs, I'm Jim Benson. See you next time.

Video Credits: Paralyzed Veterans of America.

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